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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ADDIS ABABA 006302

DEPT FOR AF A/S RICE, AF/E
USAID FOR MCCALL
NSC FOR GAYLE SMITH, JOHN PRENDERGAST
LONDON FOR PFLAUMER
PARIS FOR MORAN
ROME FOR DEMPSEY
WINDHOEK FOR MAZEL
ANTANANARIVO FOR KNIGHT

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SUBJECT: MELES ON NEXT STEPS: LET THINGS EVOLVE NATURALLY

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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) PRIME MINISTER MELES TOLD CHARGE AUGUST 8 THAT THE U.S. STATEMENT AGAINST EXPULSIONS OF ERITREANS, COMBINED WITH REPORTS THAT THE U.S. TOLD ISAIAS THAT ETHIOPIA IS TOO FRAGILE TO COMPROMISE, REFLECT ANTI-ETHIOPIA BIAS WITHIN INFLUENTIAL USG CIRCLES. ACCORDINGLY, WE SHOULD PERHAPS BACK OFF EFFORTS TO PREVENT WAR, SINCE THAT CAN ONLY BE DONE BY DEMANDING THAT ISAIAS WITHDRAW FROM BADME, AND THE U.S. DOESN'T HAVE THE WILL OR CAPACITY TO MAKE THAT DEMAND. INSTEAD, WE SHOULD ALLOW THINGS TO EVOLVE NATURALLY AND ASSESS WHAT WE MIGHT DO TO PICK UP THE PIECES AFTER A WAR. WE THINK MELES' STARK APPRAISAL WAS IN PART FOR EFFECT AMID LINGERING CONCERNS ABOUT THE U.S. STATEMENT ON DEPORTATION. WHEN PRESSED, HE MADE IT CLEAR THAT HE WOULD BE WILLING TO WORK WITH ISAIAS IF THE LATTER DEMONSTRATED "HE HAD LEARNED HIS LESSON." WHILE MELES WAS NOT A PARAGON OF FLEXIBILITY, WE STILL NEED TO PRESS AHEAD WITH PEACE INITIATIVES. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) CHARGE AND POLOFF CALLED ON PRIME MINISTER MELES AUGUST 8, AT EMBASSY REQUEST, PRIMARILY TO DISCUSS EVENTS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO. AFTER THAT DISCUSSION (SEPTEL), THE CONVERSATION TURNED TO THE ONGOING BORDER CONFLICT BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

¶3. (C) CHARGE COMMENTED THAT MELES AND ISAIAS, WHO USED TO BE SOURCES OF HELPFUL EXPERTISE AND ANALYSIS IN REGIONAL ISSUES, ARE DISTRACTED BY THEIR OWN CONFLICT, AND THEIR LEADERSHIP IS SORELY MISSED. CHARGE ASKED WHAT MELES MIGHT ACCEPT AS A SIGN FROM ISAIAS TO ALLOW A SETTLEMENT ON TECHNICAL MODALITIES TO BE FINALIZED.

14. (C) RETURNING TO AN OFT-REPEATED THEME, MELES RESPONDED THAT THE ROOT ISSUE IS THAT ISAIAS DOES NOT EVEN UNDERSTAND THE "RULES OF THE GAME" AND IS NOT A RATIONAL DECISION-MAKER. LIKE SADDAM HUSSEIN AND THE INVASION OF KUWAIT, ISAIAS MAY NOT BE ABLE TO BACK DOWN NOW BECAUSE IT WOULD BE AT VARIANCE WITH HIS UNOERSTANDING OF THE REALITIES. MELES PLACES THE ERITREAN INVASION IN THE CONTEST OF CONFLICTING ECONOMIC VISIONS. ERITREA WAS CLEAR FROM 1991 ON THAT IT WANTED TO BE SINGAPORE AND WOULO NEEO THE SUPPORT OF THE "HINTERLANDS". ETHIOPIA, NO HINTERLAND, UNDERTOOK A ROUTE TO ITS OWN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THAT STYMIED ERITREA'S, AND ECONOMIC DISAGREEMENTS SIMMERED FOR SOME TIME. MELES HYPOTHEZIZES NOW THAT ISAIAS INVADDED BADME, THE TRIGGER FOR THE CURRENT CONFLICT, IN PART TO WARN ETHIOPIA OF ERITREAN CAPABILITIES SHOULD THE GFDRE CONTINUE TO STAND IN THE WAY OF THE ERITREAN ECONOMIC VISION.

15. (C) ISAIAS ASSUMED, MELES BELIEVES, THAT ETHIOPIA WAS MORE MILITARILY UNPREPARED THAN ERITREA AND THAT IT WOULD AVOID OPEN WAR BECAUSE IT HAS BENEFITED SO MUCH FROM PEACE. THIS WAS A MISCALCULATION. WHILE ETHIOPIA WAS MORE UNPREPARED, IT HAD THE CORE OF ITS ARMEO FORCES IN PLACE AND WAS ABLE TO CALL UP OEMOBILIZED FIGHTERS AND TO TRAIN OTHERS. MOREOVER, WITH THE INVASION OF BAOME AND THE ATTEMPT TO CHANGE FACTS ON THE GROUND BY FORCE, ERITREA CROSSED AN ETHIOPIAN RED LINE. ON OTHER ISSUES, ETHIOPIA MIGHT HAVE AGREED TO TURN ITS CHEEK, BUT THIS AFFRONT WAS SO GREAT THAT TO LET IT PASS IN SILENCE WOULD HAVE BEEN ESSENTIALLY TO RELINQUISH NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY. THUS, THE DEMAND THAT ISAIAS WITHDRAW AND THAT BADME BE RETURNEO TO THE STATUS QUO ANTE IS EVERYTHING. IF HE DOES, THEN PERHAPS HE WILL HAVE LEARNEO HIS LESSON. IF HE DOES NOT, THEN HE MUST BE TAUGHT.

U.S. UNFAIR AND SHOWS LACK OF CONSENSUS

16. (C) MELES WAS DISMISSIVE OF SUGGESTIONS FROM WASHINGTON THAT A RENEWED ENGAGEMENT BY THE U.S. WOULD BEAR FRUIT. FIRST, HE EXPRESSED AGAIN HIS ANNOYANCE OVER THE USG STATEMENT OF AUGUST 6 WITH REGARD TO THE EXPULSIONS OF ERITREANS. THIS, HE REPEATED, WAS UNFAIR AND UNBALANCED. THE U.S. SAID NOTHING ABOUT THE CHILDREN KILLED IN MEKELLE, NOTHING ABOUT 170,000 DISPLACED AND VOICELESS PEASANTS IN TIGRAY AND NOTHING ABOUT THE DESTRUCTION OF ZAL ANBESSA, BUT IT ATTACKS ETHIOPIA FOR POLITELY ASKING SOME POSSIBLE SECURITY THREATS TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY. THIS IS MORE THAN A SENTIMENTAL ISSUE, HE ARGUED; SUBSTANTIVELY, THE ISSUANCE OF SUCH A STATEMENT SUPPORTS THE ETHIOPIAN BELIEF, LONG HELD BUT IN ABEYANCE IN RECENT MONTHS, THAT THE U.S. APPLIES A DOUBLE STANDARD IN ITS TREATMENT OF ERITREA AND ETHIOPIA. THIS WAS ALWAYS CLEAR IN ANNUAL HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTS. HE WAS FOREWARNED THAT A STATEMENT WAS IN THE WORKS, AND ASSUMES THE EVENTUAL FINAL VERSION WAS "SANITIZED" FROM EARLIER DRAFTS.

17. (C) IT IS CLEAR THEN, MELES ACCUSED, THAT THERE ARE PEOPLE OF INFLUENCE IN THE U.S. GOVERNMENT WHO ARE CAPABLE OF WORSE LANGUAGE ABOUT ETHIOPIA AND THAT THERE IS NO CONSENSUS ON THE ISSUE. HE HAD JUST READ A MAGAZINE INTERVIEW WITH ISAIAS, IN WHICH THE ERITREAN INDICATED THAT U.S. OFFICIALS HAD TOLD HIM HE MUST BE MORE FLEXIBLE BECAUSE ETHIOPIA IS TOO FRAGILE TO PERMIT MELES TO BEND. WHILE HE KNOWS ISAIAS PLAYS FAST AND LOOSE WITH THE TRUTH, MELES SAID, SOMETHING LIKE THIS MIGHT HAVE BEEN SAID. AFTER ALL, HE HAS HEARD THAT AT LEAST ONE OF THE FACILITATORS HAS SAID HE REGRETS HAVING DRAFTED THEIR RECOMMENDATIONS. BY TELLING THIS TO ISAIAS, THE U.S. MERELY REINFORCES ISAIAS' MISPERCEPTIONS OF THE SITUATION. IF THE U.S. BELIEVES ETHIOPIA WILL CRACK UNDER PRESSURE, ITS PREMISES ARE DIAMETRICALLY

OPPOSED TO THOSE ON WHICH MELES IS OPERATING.

SO WHY DON'T YOU JUST LAY OFF, LET THINGS EVOLVE

18. (C) WITH ALL THIS IN MIND, MELES FINDS THE CONTINUING U.S. WISH TO CONCENTRATE ON PREVENTION OF ARMED CONFLICT OFF THE MARK. TO PREVENT WAR WILL TAKE A VERY STRONG MESSAGE TO ISAIAS. ASKED BY THE CHARGE TO ELABORATE, MELES PROPOSED THE FOLLOWING LANGUAGE: "ISAIAS, THIS IS YOUR MESS. YOU MAY PAY SOME POLITICAL COSTS BY WITHDRAWING FROM BADME, BUT IF YOU DO NOT, YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN, WITHOUT OUR SUPPORT AND WITHOUT OUR PRESSURE ON ETHIOPIA TO AVOID WAR." THIS MESSAGE, MELES STATED CATEGORICALLY, IS ONE THAT THE U.S., WHICH ISSUED THE AUGUST 6 STATEMENT AND WHICH MIGHT HAVE CALLED ETHIOPIA FRAGILE, CANNOT AND WILL NOT SEND. THUS IT IS BETTER, MELES SUGGESTED, IF THE U.S. LETS THINGS TAKE THEIR COURSE AND EVOLVE NATURALLY. JUST BE AWARE, HE ADDED, THAT NOTHING WILL PREVENT ETHIOPIA'S ATTEMPT TO DISLODGE ISAIAS FROM BADME IF HE DOES NOT WITHDRAW VOLUNTARILY.

WHY NOT PREPARE FOR THE EVENTUAL AFTERMATH?

19. (C) A BETTER USE OF OUR ANALYTIC CAPACITY, MELES PROPOSED, IS TO ASSESS THE END GAME AND WHAT THE U.S. MIGHT DO TO PICK UP THE PIECES LATER, AFTER THE WORST HAPPENS AND THE TWO COUNTRIES FIGHT IT OUT. A FRIEND WITH RESOURCES AND A PLAN FOR THE AFTERMATH WOULD BE MOST WELCOME. WHY NOT PREPARE FOR THE THREE EVENTUALITIES: ETHIOPIA CRACKS, ERITREA CRACKS, THERE IS A DRAW.

MELES CAN WORK WITH ISAIAS, IF HE BACKS DOWN

110. (C) CHARGE DEMURRED AT MELES' CATEGORIZATION OF OUR DEPORTATIONS STATEMENT, OBSERVING IT WAS ISSUED TO ADDRESS A SYMPTOM OF THE LARGER CONFLICT. HE URGED MELES TO DIVORCE THE EXPULSIONS AND OUR STATEMENT FROM EFFORTS TO RESOLVE THE CONFLICT. MOREOVER, TO THE EXTENT THE EMBASSY OBTAINS CREDIBLE INFORMATION ABOUT ERITREAN ABUSES OF ETHIOPIANS, WE WILL RESPOND PUBLICLY WITH DISAPPROVAL THERE, TOO. (CHARGE ADDED THAT AN EMBASSY TEAM IS VISITING REPUTED ETHIOPIAN DEPORTEES IN DESSE THIS WEEK.) AS TO ISAIAS' REPORTED STATEMENT ABOUT U.S. OFFICIALS CALLING ETHIOPIA TOO FRAGILE TO BEND, THE CHARGE ASSURED THE PRIME MINISTER THIS IS NOT U.S. POLICY AND THAT HE COULD NOT IMAGINE SUCH A THING BEING PRESENTED TO ISAIAS. FINALLY, HE EXPRESSED SOME CONCERN OVER MELES' DRAWING A COMPARISON BETWEEN ISAIAS AND SADDAM HUSSEIN, COMMENTING THAT THIS IMPLIED MELES WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO WORK WITH ISAIAS IN ANY EVENT.

111. (C) MELES ANSWERED THAT HE SEES THE STATEMENT AS A REFLECTION OF A NEGATIVE STATE OF MIND AND THAT, WHILE ISAIAS MIGHT HAVE LIED, HE IS STILL CONCERNED ABOUT WHAT HE SAID. AS TO THE SADDAM ANALOGY, MELES ASSURED CHARGE HE CAN WORK WITH ISAIAS IF THIS CONFLICT IS SETTLED PEACEFULLY, ALTHOUGH HE CAN "NEVER LOVE HIM OR TRUST HIM AGAIN." ASKED AGAIN WHETHER, FOR EXAMPLE, A COMMITMENT BY ISAIAS TO WITHDRAW FROM BADME FIRST MIGHT SUFFICE TO RESTART PEACE NEGOTIATIONS, MELES STRESSED THAT WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS THAT THE INVADER WITHDRAW BEFORE THE INVADERS. ERITREA HAS TO DO THIS UNILATERALLY, NOT AS ITS SIDE OF A JOINT WITHDRAWAL FOR DEMILITARIZATION. THAT WILL MAKE THE POINT TO ALL ERITREANS THAT THERE CAN BE NO CHANGE BY FORCE, AND THEY WILL ACT AS A BRAKE ON ISAIAS SHOULD HE WISH TO GO ADVENTURING AGAIN. THAT WILL BE ETHIOPIA'S GUARANTEE OF SECURITY IN FUTURE.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) MOST OF THE PRIVATE PRESS IS EXPRESSING OUTRAGE OVER THE U.S. STATEMENT AND ONE ARTICLE CALLED IT THE FOURTH U.S. BETRAYAL OF ETHIOPIA (OUR REFUSAL TO STAND AGAINST ITALY'S INVASION, OUR FAILURE TO ASSIST WHEN SIAD BARRE INVADED, AND OUR ACQUIESCENCE IN TPLF'S ALLOWING ERITREA ITS INDEPENDENCE BEING THE FIRST THREE). MELES' PORTRAYAL OF THE BETRAYED ETHIOPIAN APPEARED HEARTFELT. HIS ANALYSIS OF U.S. INCAPACITY TO ACT AS HONEST BROKER NOW, WHILE ILLOGICAL FROM AN OBJECTIVE POINT OF VIEW, CLEARLY REFLECTS A LOSS OF CONFIDENCE, ALTHOUGH WE DO NOT EXCLUDE THE REAL POSSIBILITY THAT HE ALSO SEEKS TO BOLSTER U.S. RESOLVE. MELES' SUGGESTION THE U.S. BEGIN ASSESSING WHAT IT MIGHT DO IN THE AFTERMATH OF WAR APPEARS TO BE HIS WAY OF SAYING "IF YOU CAN'T TAKE THE HEAT, GET OUT OF THE KITCHEN." WE THINK WE SHOULD STAY IN THE KITCHEN AND BE PREPARED TO TAKE MUCH MORE HEAT FROM BOTH MELES AND ISAIAS AS WE TRY TO PUSH THE PEACE PROCESS FORWARD. THERE WILL ALWAYS BE TIME TO PICK UP THE PIECES IF WE DO NOT SUCCEED.

¶13. (U) ASMARA, DAR ES SALAAM, KAMPALA AND NAIROBI MINIMIZE CONSIDERED.

BRENNAN